Editorial

Exploring the Extreme Case

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There is a saying, ‘do not paint the devil on the wall’, which is commonly taken to mean that one should, for all intents and purposes, avoid portraying something in an overly negative or exaggerated way. The German origin of the proverb is even more interesting. It says: ‘One should not paint the devil on the wall, since he will enter the room anyway’¹. Rather than referring to a moral virtue (*don’t be overly pessimistic, don’t exaggerate*), the original proverb is, in itself, a pessimistic view on the world. In short, you don’t need to evoke the devil, since he is already here. Or, perhaps, you don’t need to exaggerate, since the world is already exaggerated. This special issue started out as an attempt to pursue this idea: If the world is exaggerated, wouldn’t this require us to use exaggerated examples to describe it?

Lars Højer and Andreas Bandak distinguish between two extreme poles of the example: an example *as example* and an example *as exemplar* (Højer and Bandak 2015, 1). The ‘example’ doesn’t necessarily have any general application. From the outset it is detached, a singularity. Following its etymology, it is something liberated from the wider context. It is akin to a ‘detail’—and as with all details, the question is whether this example has the ability to say anything of significance in relation to the whole. The example *as example* only achieves significance by repetition and by being connected to others this kind.

At the other end of the continuum, Højer and Bandak argue, we encounter the ‘exemplary example’—the example that acts as a prism through which we can grasp the intricacies of the larger whole. Here we have the examples that can be interpreted, explored, and that point further into and confirm social and ontological patterns already present and realized.

¹ Man braucht den Teufel nicht an die Wand zu malen, er kommt auch ohne das herein

But what if we imagined that when reaching the exemplary example, we were, in fact, only halfway along the continuum? What would the *radical* end be? We call this the ‘extreme example’.

The extreme example is, of course, a well-know—and in fact infamous—term within social sciences. Indeed, the political world and the media of today is bursting with extreme examples and scenarios that are being portrayed in such a way that the worst case becomes the most likely case. In the Trumpist era of political rhetoric, it has been argued that hyperbolic language has taken on a new role in politics (Abbas 2019). Donald Trump has himself become an example of what has been termed ‘Super-Hyperbolic Man’ using extreme examples, as we all know, as a strategy in speeches in order to negatively portray political opponents, immigrants and women, and others (ibid.). Trump, seemingly intentionally, engages with the type of rhetoric that the field of logics would consider a fundamental, mortal sin. This is often phrased in the following way:

X is true for A,

X is true for B.

Consequently: X is true for C, D, E,

The politician of the Trumpist era makes absurd generalizations based on the type of extreme cases that would commonly be dismissed or considered invalid within traditional scientific discourse. For isn’t it the case that the use of extreme examples constitutes ‘bad science’—or else, that the good example is the example that is repetitive or representative—that shows and confirms the general social landscape that the researcher sets out to explore? For instance, in the social sciences we speak of the ‘typical case sampling’ that is opposed to the ‘extreme case sampling’ (Etikan et al 2016). The latter approach is designed to focus on individuals who are atypical. As Michael Patton Explains, this form of sampling is commonly used when researchers develop ‘best in practice’ guidelines and, specifically, when indexing ‘what not to do’ (Patton 2015, 3).

Studying the extreme case may indeed offer insights, but the insights are commonly not of an inductive nature. In other words, one cannot derive general principles from extreme cases since such cases are not representative. This appears to be a logic accepted by many anthropologists. As with Trump, the extreme example is considered manipulative in that it not only provides a distorted version of reality: it seeks to *distort* reality. The extreme case seeks to generate an effect rather than confirm by mere representation.

The question then is: is there a place in anthropology for extreme cases? Instead of reducing the extreme to ‘the exception that confirms the rule’, in this special issue, we attempt to embrace and explore how people make use of extreme cases. We do this by asking what extreme cases and extreme examples do in both public and everyday life. How does the extreme distort and create effect?

Furthermore, when writing ethnography, we often make use of the cases—the outliers—that, we hope, crystalize the specific problem that we attempt to tackle. We suggest that the extreme case is not only where the good story is at (though this may indeed be the case), but we also dive in by asking how the amplified, exaggerated or distorted version of reality may allow new potentialities to come into being.

In this special issue, we suggest expanding the continuum of examples and accepting that when we reach the exemplary, we are only halfway.

This special issue is the product of a panel at *Megaseminar*, the biannual conference for anthropologists based in Denmark. For the panel entitled ‘Exploring the Extreme Case,’ we encouraged participants to discuss the use of extreme cases within anthropological writings and, more broadly, in relation to the way people in various ethnographic contexts make sense of the world through such cases. The panel both asked the question of what type of anthropology emerges when we explicitly choose to put the extreme case at the center of our work while also exploring the way extreme cases operate more generally across social fields. Thus, rather than a coherent argument running through the articles—which would somehow oppose itself to a challenge concerning the use of extreme examples—we have urged each writer to provide an individual piece.

The extreme example provokes, disrupts and makes us both question and realize aspects of the world. This reflects in the contributions to this special issue.

In the article ‘*Can Muggles be Autistic?*’, Fie Lund Christensen uses the extreme worldview of her autistic interlocutors to ask the question if, in fact, there are no extremes in autism. On the basis of a group-interview with three autistic women, Christensen shows how the women use the fictional universe of Harry Potter to suggest that what is in the clinical world seen as extreme on a ‘human spectrum’ is in fact a parallel reality inhabited by people who are born inherently different—like Muggles and Wizards. Instead of a spectrum disorder of extreme versions of humanity, the women perceive autism as a core, which separates people with autism from the rest of humankind.

Maja Ejrnæs’ contribution questions our very sense of reality through the question ‘*What if Imagination Were Real?*’ Extremity is in this article exemplified as contrasts and ambiguities between the normal world and the sensuous manifestations by the performance group ‘Sisters Hope’. Such as when members of the performance-team work to build and maintain the particular physical framing of an event in favor of the participants experience of the performance as ‘otherworldly’ reality. Or, by contrast, when the actions of performance-members disturb or distort the frame of the ‘normal’ when they work with random people. In both cases, the extremity of the performance—its ability to create ‘something radically different’—momentarily transforms reality for those involved and questions what is real and why.

In a very different context William J Robertson, too, evokes the power of the extreme example to disrupt and question what is normal, everyday-like and habituated. However, Robertson suggests that the extreme is not in opposition to the everyday, but rather complementary to it. In his article *'Tale of Two Shitties'* he focuses on the extraordinary situations when patients in an anal cancer prevention clinic involuntarily defecate through the anoscope during the procedure. Though these incidents are non-representative of the 'normal' at the clinic, Robertson suggests that these extreme examples are particularly fruitful to open the routinized everyday up for questions and analysis, because they disrupt and reveal the habituation practices.

Henrik Hvenegaard Mikkelsen's article *'Out of the Ordinary: Monsters as Extreme Cases Among the Bugkalot and Beyond'*, also investigates the extreme as highlighting the inherent features of the normal. Grounded in the Bugkalot people's monstrous character of the 'mansasadile', Mikkelsen suggests that the 'mansasadile' is in fact the masculine ideal of independence taken to its destructive extreme. The monster is evoked by the Bugkalot in face of social change as many young men go to live independent lives in the surrounding industrialized society. From this, Mikkelsen argues that the extreme and alienating features of 'the monster' are in fact a radically actualized version of potent features inherent in the normal societal form.

In My Madsen's contribution, *'Hyper-ideal Sociality: Rushing Activities as Extreme Rituals of Learning Professional Ideals'*, the extreme is cast as hyper-actualized enactments of social ideals. By comparing the professional ideal at a technical university to the students' elaborate rushing activities, Madsen shows how central features in rushing serves to ritually highlight specific social expectations connected to the ideal. Activities such as drinking, fancy-dressing, games and competitions are done in ways that overstate the ideal socio-professional behavior. As such, rushing activities serve to teach new students how to be and behave professionally by momentarily living the ideal in an extreme hyper-version.

This special issue also includes several non-peer-reviewed essays which have emerged in response to the rather extreme covid-19 pandemic and the crisis as it unfolded. Moreover, this issue also includes a book review by Anthony Ellis of Justin Kotzé's book *The Myth of the Crime Decline*.

We are excited to able to present this special issue and to invite readers to explore with us the intricacies, allures and potentials of the extreme examples.

References

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